

Snowmobiling on wane

Enthusiasts want Legislature to revive Utah's potential

WASATCH MOUNTAIN STATE PARK — Years ago, when snowmobiles were noisy, undependable, big, bulky, and came in some 129 makes, consensus was that Utah had some of the finest riding in the country.

Long-range planners had Utah moving up to become snowmobile capital of the western U.S. There was talk of trail systems to rival the state's freeway system. Riders would be able to cross from border to border and never leave groomed trails.

There was talk of snowmobile parks and snowmobile resorts. Snowmobiling, they predicted, would rival skiing as a winter pastime and a boom to the economy.

Today, now that the surviving five manufacturers have evolved the snowmobile into a quiet, dependable, comfortable, sleek machine, Utah still has some of the finest riding in the country. There are, however, no resorts, no parks, no areas set up especially for snowmobilers.

And as for Utah's trail systems, it



ROY GRASS

Deseret News
outdoor writer

was possible to go further and more comfortably back when snowmobiles broke the noise limit.

Ten years ago, Utah had nearly 700 miles of well-groomed trails, four good trail groomers, a fleet of mini-groomers and a fairly happy following of snowmobile owners.

Today, Utah has only about 400 miles of sometimes-groomed trails, four old groomers that are in for replacement as often as they are out on the trails, a few worn-out mini-groomers, and a rather large following of displeased snowmobile owners.

And what of the snowmobile capital? It shifted north, to Idaho. The Po-

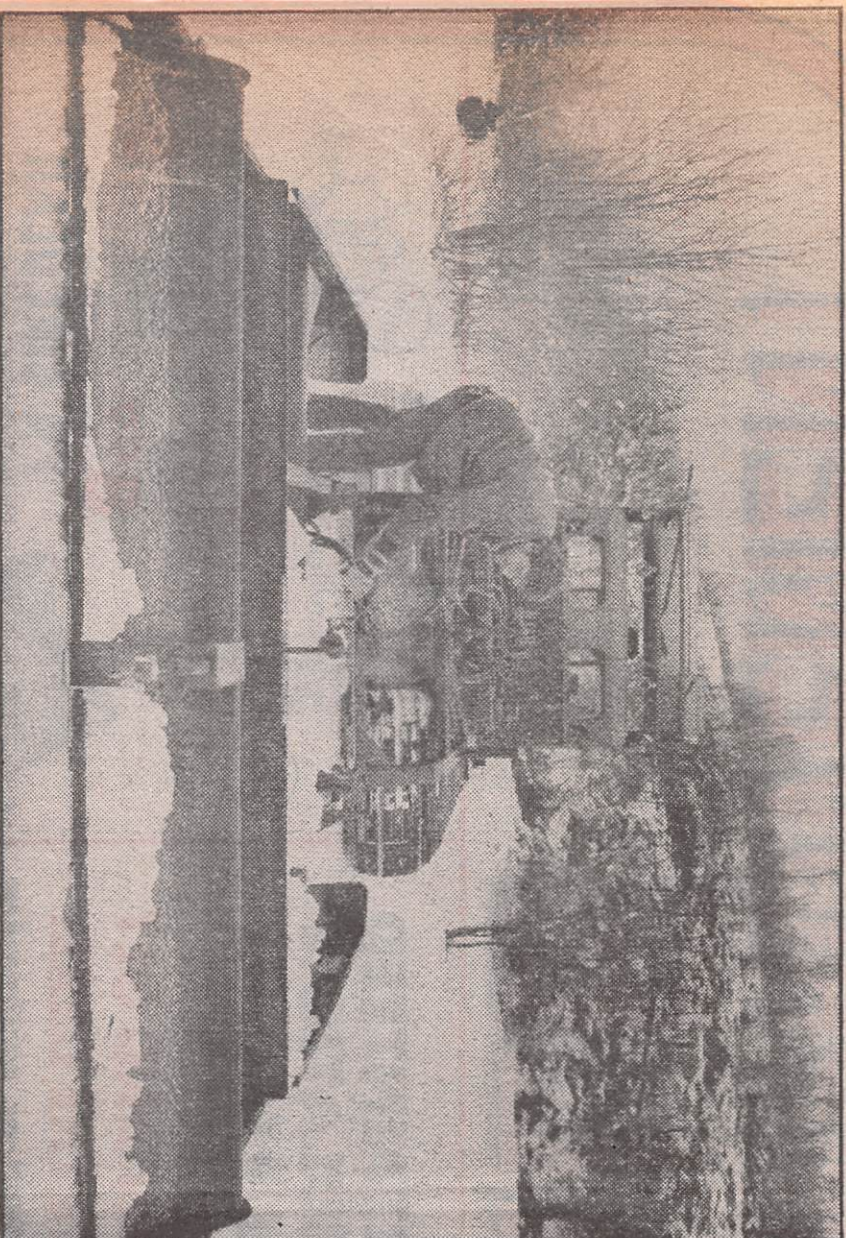
tato State has over 5,000 miles of groomed snowmobile trails, a fleet of 28 state-owned groomers and several privately owned groomers, and about the same number of snowmobile owners as Utah.

The difference is that in Idaho, gas that goes into the snowmobiles helps pay for snowmobile programs there, while in Utah it doesn't. Idaho, like California, Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming, returns a fair share of the gas tax paid by snowmobilers back into the sport. Utah doesn't.

The "Fuel Tax Refund For Off-Highway Vehicles," Senate Bill 40, is now before the Utah Legislature.

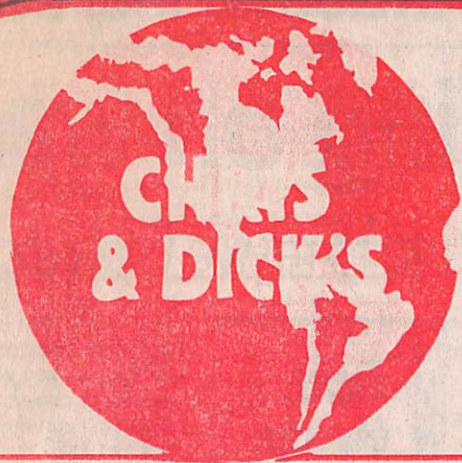
If it passes, recognizing that it won't go into effect until 1988, it will take at least four to five years to bring Utah's existing program and trail system an acceptable level. Then, and only then, can it be expanded.

And if it doesn't pass, Utah's trail system may soon be no more than a few short paths.



PHOTOGRAPHY/O. WALLACE KASTELER

Trail groomers like the one above are gradually becoming an extinct species in Utah. When they're operating, as below, they can make snowmobiling much more enjoyable.



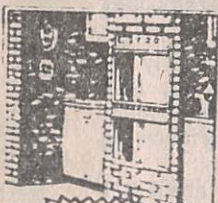
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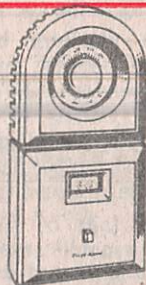
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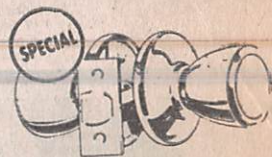
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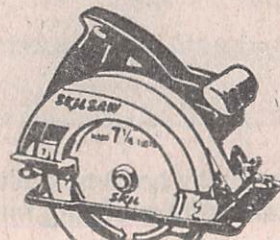
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Utah's budget for snowmobiling in 1986-87 was \$31,000. A large portion of that went to the Department of Transportation to clear parking areas for snowmobilers. Earlier this month, the DOT announced it will be cutting back on plowing these areas because of budget problems.

It was reported earlier this year that if a major problem were to develop in one of the four groomers, there would not be enough money to repair it, and considering the age and the fact these groomers were made for travel and rescue, not grooming, it was very likely. Earlier this week, the groomer in the Southern Region broke down and is out for the season. To replace that groomer would take the entire budget for the next five years.

So right now Utah snowmobilers are stuck, and according to Craig Cazier, president of the Utah Snowmobile Association, they aren't happy.

"Snowmobile owners are paying to register their machines and the tax on the gas they use in the snowmobiles, and they can see they are getting nothing in return," said Cazier.

He added, "Having well-groomed trails just makes for a much nicer day. It means enjoying the ride, or not enjoying it. Groomed trails can make snowmobiling fun, or a lot of work . . . and when it gets to be a lot of work, people stop snowmobiling."

Example: In 1985 there were 13,500 snowmobiles registered in Utah. Last year it dropped to 12,800.

Cazier feels it happened because snowmobilers are unhappy with what's available in Utah.

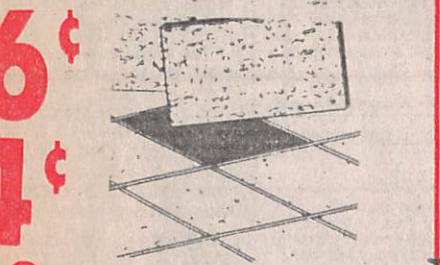
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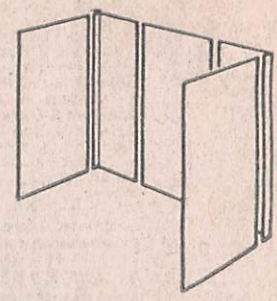
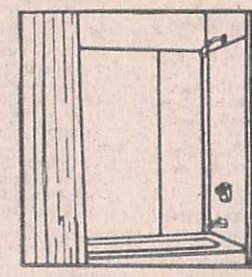
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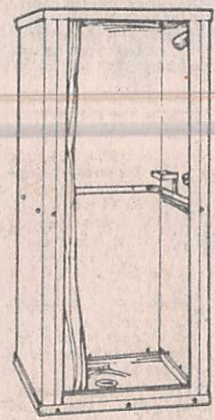
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